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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION CAPTURES WARSAW MAYORALTY

REF: WARSAW 2389

1. Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz from the opposition Civic Platform (PO) will become Warsaw's first woman mayor on Saturday, December 2. Gronkiewicz-Waltz won a decisive victory against former PM Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, the acting Mayor, in run off elections held on November 26. Gronkiewicz-Waltz carried 53% of the vote despite Marcinkiewicz's stature as the most trusted and popular politician in Poland. The opposition's victory in Warsaw was widely viewed as a rejection of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) led coalition government of Jaroslaw Kaczynski. While Marcinkiewicz was quick to congratulate his opponent, PM Kaczynski issued a surly statement saying that the results were a troubling return to politics as usual. Marcinkiewicz, though personally popular, suffered from his identification as the PiS candidate in a city where PO won in last year's national elections, and captured the city council in the first round of voting on November 12. Marcinkiewicz, who comes from Gorzow Wielkopolskie in Western Poland, may have also lost votes because of the view among some voters that he was something of a carpet-bagger.

2. After the weekend vote, Marcinkiewicz's future became the most widely-speculated topic of conversation. He personally quipped on a local radio station that "unemployment is low in Warsaw; I'm confident I'll be able to find something to occupy my time." He vowed to take a month's vacation with his family and make a decision only afterwards, however many expect his return to a prominent position in the government, possibly as Minister of Education, Economy, Treasury or Foreign Affairs. Minister of Education Roman Giertych announced that Marcinkiewicz replacing him at Education would break the government coalition, and many discount the MFA possibility owing to the importance the Kaczynskis attach to complete loyalty. There were also rumors that Marcinkiewicz could serve as the President of the National Bank of Poland when that job becomes open in January 2007. Ironically, his opponent in Warsaw, Gronkiewicz-Waltz, held that job from 1992 to 2000.

PO's Jan Rokita Out on a Limb?

3. The turnout for the second round of mayoral runoffs was nearly 40% of those eligible to vote. Elsewhere in Poland, incumbents were re-elected in several major cities, including Krakow, Lodz and Poznan. In Krakow, independent incumbent Jacek Majchrowski walked away with nearly 60% of the vote, despite the unusual political endorsement from PO's Jan Rokita of Majchrowski's PiS challenger, Ryszard Terlecki. Rokita's endorsement caused a flap within PO, and raised anew the speculation that he was steering an independent political route. Marcinkiewicz added fuel to that rumor today when he confirmed that he had agreed to meet with Rokita at an unspecified time in the near future to talk about Poland as a "peer to another peer."

14. Comment: As noted reftel, the race in Warsaw was unique in this year's local balloting because it was viewed as a referendum on the Kaczynski government. Elsewhere, incumbents fared well no matter their party. However, the larger the city, the likelier that it voted for the opposition. Overall, PO captured the largest number of seats in regional assemblies (sejmiks), PiS captured a majority of town councils, and the opposition Peasant's Party (PSL) won the largest share of the smallest local (village) councils. If PO and PSL can forge a lasting political bond, the opposition may finally be able to crack PiS's electoral lock on the rural heartland, which delivered PiS victories in last year's parliamentary and presidential elections. End comment.

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